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What Time Is It When You're Black?

What time is it when you're black? In the poetry volume *Finna*, Nate Marshall (2020) offers "finna" as an answer to this question. Marshall defines *finna* as

1. going to; intending to [rooted in African American Vernacular English]
2. eye dialect spelling of "fixing to"
3. black possibility; black futurity; blackness as tomorrow (back cover)

The everyday use of *finna*, in the interiority of black community, reshapes a universal feeling into a state of anticipation that is specifically black. *Finna* is the feeling of urgency and expectancy produced by what Michael Sawyer (2018: vii) describes as black fractured temporality—"Be(ing) Out of Time." Sawyer argues that black "be(ing) out of time" is created by the "time-fracturing technologies" that have shaped black subjects, technologies such as the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, white supremacy, police brutality, and so on (2018: vii). The Ellisonian "different sense of time" created by these shattering technologies is being reimagined, in the first decades of twenty-first century African American literature, through new frames. Claudia Rankine's *time of the sigh*, in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) and *The White Card* (2019), and

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Toni Morrison's *time of the open body* and the *anticipation of second skin*, in *Five Poems* (2002) and *God Help the Child* (2015), are twenty-first-century recalibrations of Frantz Fanon's theory of the "slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world" (Fanon 1967: 111). Reading Rankine alongside Morrison makes us rehear this iconic Fanonian premise as the "slow composition of my *flesh* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world." Twenty-first-century African American literature is opening up new dimensions of the liminal space where black flesh *never* quite consolidates into the black body. Black flesh is always "finna" be contained and always subverting the forces of containment. The black radical imagination is set in motion by the liminality and openness of black flesh.

Toward a Theory of *Finna*

The liminality of the black vernacular "finna" is the old, black vernacular grammar that continues to sound too new to be assimilated into standard English. Suspended between shattering historical trauma and a present that is marked and not marked by that historical trauma, blackened people live in a state of *finna*. The liminality of the past deeply shaping the present, even as the present begins to move away from that past, is the feeling of *finna*. "Finna" is the sound of the "immediate future" and it is also a "preparatory activity between the speech act and the action to which it refers" (Zanuttini et al. 2018). Marshall's *finna* is an aesthetics of black temporality that makes the everyday experience of anticipation feel like the immediacy of futurity, the touching of what is almost here. The black *finna* is the "already here" of the "not yet here." José Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, rethinks queer aesthetics as the art of what is "not yet here" (2009). In *The Sense of Brown*, Muñoz separates brownness from the not yet here of queerness: "I suggest queerness is in the horizon, forward dawning and not-yet-here. Brownness diverges from my definition of queerness. Brownness is already here" (Muñoz 2020: 121–22). The space that Muñoz gives "brown," the way he allows it to be amorphous and a collective feeling, is similar to the lowercase "blackness" that moves in and out of the settled identity of "Black." When Marshall, in the poem "Finna," slides from capitalized blackness to lowercase brownness ("it's Black / & it's brown & it's alive"), the settled identity of "black" (the only capitalized word in the poem) is wonderfully undone as the lowercase brownness makes the capitalized blackness lose the aura of the definitive and gain the rhythm of *finna* (the repetition of the ampersand).

The feeling of blackness as *finna* is steadily erased when the past overdetermines the black present and makes black life the afterlife of trauma that

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has already happened. As the already here of the not yet here, black *finna* is the tingle that can only be felt by the person living the already here of the not yet here. The 2020 move to standardize the capitalization of the word *black* cancels out black *finna*. In the summer of 2020, during the national and transnational Black Lives Matter protests, the *New York Times* decided to begin capitalizing "black." W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1926, started a movement to push the *New York Times* and other publications to capitalize the word *negro*. In 1930, the *New York Times* agreed to begin capitalizing "negro." This *New York Times* mainstream media shift to "Black" has motivated many other publishers, academics, journalists, and people in social media to shift to capitalizing "black" with consistency as if lowercase blackness is an inability to understand what blackness signifies. But lowercase blackness is the already here of the not yet here; capitalized Blackness is simply already here.

When the *New York Times* framed their 2020 decision to capitalize *black* by invoking Du Bois's 1926 campaign for the capitalization of *Negro*, the difference between "Negro" and "Black" was effaced. But lowercase *negro* never had the signifying power tied to lower- or uppercase blackness. During the 1960s global Black Power Movement, people of African descent rejected the name "negro" and mobilized "black" as a way of naming and hailing a new collective consciousness, a new way of thinking, appearing, and feeling—what A. B. Spellman (1998: 52–53) described as the "sensuality of a collective consciousness that declared itself on sight." The Black Arts and Black Power movements mobilized "black" as an identity and as a world. The words "Black World" are omnipresent during the Black Arts and Black Power movements. These liberation movements created space for the *world* of unsettled lowercase blackness that is much more complex than a fixed identity. In the fall semester of 2020, one of my students included the following footnote as she explained her use of capitalized "Black" throughout her essay: "My capitalization of the word 'Black' is a reclamation, a resistance to Blackness and Black people being relegated to un-proper categories. 'Black' is a color. 'Black' is an identity, proper." This student wants "black" to signal a "proper" identity. Her reference to the "un-proper categories" (embedded in lowercase blackness) reveals a lack of interest in the black space and time of *disorder* that the 2020 widespread move to standardize the capitalization of "black" is shutting down. The impulse to fix black disorder and standardize what cannot be standardized cannot crush the impulse to create the nonstandard English aesthetic possibilities of *finna*.

The temporality of lowercase blackness animates the wave of twenty-first-century black art that gestures, in many different ways, to the unmarking of "the black past equals the black present" and the scenes of loosening

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what Toni Morrison, in "The Slavebody and the Blackbody" (2019), describes as the equation of "slavebody" and the "blackbody" (2019: 74–78). When Morrison, in *A Mercy*, writes, "You say I am wilderness. I am," we hear the state of being possessed by dispossession, the state of lowercase blackness (2008: 184). Fred Moten, in *Black and Blur*, develops this idea of being possessed by dispossession. Moten calls for "acknowledging what it is to own dispossession, which cannot be owned but by which one can be possessed" (Moten 2017: 85). In *A Mercy*, the poetics of dispossession becomes the poetics of *finna* when Morrison gives us the most tender line in the novel: "I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness" (Morrison 2008: 49). When Florens delivers these words, she is in the colonial America, pre-consolidation of "slave equals black" zone. She is in what Morrison describes as "ad hoc territory" (15). Florens needs Lina "to say how" to live in the in-between zone of being marked and not marked. She needs Lina "to say how" to live her blackness as shelter and wilderness, as marked and unmarked. Once Lina "says how," Florens is *finna* be her own shelter in her own wilderness. *Finna* is the only verb tense that expresses what is black about what she needs from Lina, what is black about this desire, this need, to "shelter in wilderness."

Finna is the verb tense that captures the lower frequencies of Morrison's famous words "we do language" (as opposed to being done by language). Florens *finna do language*, at the end of *A Mercy*, when Morrison imagines her writing on the walls of the master's house and learning "to say how" on her own terms, once she reaches the point of claiming the wilderness as her shelter. Moten's way of thinking about the "possessed by dispossession" lived experience of blackness has a temporality—the temporality that Hortense Spillers describes as the latent movement in the still being. Spillers's words "Something still is about to move" express the feeling of *black finna* (Spillers 2010). This non-gap between black stillness and black motion is felt in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* when she makes the black sigh express a type of melancholic hope that is the time of the "pathway to breath" (Rankine 2014: 60).

The Time of the Sigh

The "pathway to breath" is, in *Citizen*, the state of stillness "about to move" and become the release of outbreath. In many parts of *Citizen*, Rankine makes the sigh signal what it feels like to be a black person who is trapped because she is both inside and outside of the trauma of what Fanon describes as the "slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world" (Fanon 1967: 111). The sigh for Rankine is the slow denatu-

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ralizing of the black-body-in-pain. Rankine makes the sigh signal a partially unconscious letting out of that which one never wanted to take in. She describes the black body becoming a "cupboard" and then makes the sigh the black bodily response that creates discomfort because it has an opacity that differs from expressions of pure pain. The sigh is ambiguous. Rankine muses, "You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sighing is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn't call it an illness; still it is not the iteration of a free being" (Rankine 2014: 60). The sigh and the repression of the sigh, for Rankine, signal the heaviness of black flesh becoming a "cupboard" of the past and the disorientation a black subject feels as she is always hesitating, always on the edge of "moving on" (63, 66). Rankine makes the Black Lives Matter mantra "I can't breathe" morph into "I can't sigh": "Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that" (59). The involuntary sigh, for Rankine, becomes a way of understanding the horror of all of the forces that make it so difficult to breathe while black. Rankine also makes the sigh a way of understanding the horror of the spectacle that keeps naturalizing black pain and erasing the possibility of release from that pain. She knows that the sigh is usually associated with sadness, but she makes the sigh signal a release of tension that cannot be pinned down as simply sadness. The sigh, in *Citizen*, signals the black emotional release that is shut down by the everyday performance of white privilege that makes it so hard to breathe while black. When Rankine makes it clear that the sigh is the "pathway to breath" and "allows breathing" (the release that would be necessary before one can breathe deeply), we feel the urgency of "I can't sigh" as the refusal of the idea that black people are *always already* having trouble breathing (60). Rankine writes, "Do you remember when you sighed?" (63).

Even as she centralizes the murder of Trayvon Martin and inveighs against the violence of an anti-black police structure that began during slavery, she also troubles the naturalizing of a culture of black pain. Rankine refuses to reproduce a culture of black pain even as she shows how steady the everyday enactments of white supremacy are. She creates space for an understanding of the "self-preservation" that is seized even as the anti-blackness continues to injure (60). After describing a couple's pain as they sit in the car hearing the news of Trayvon Martin's murderer being declared not guilty, she writes, "A breeze touches your cheek. / As something should" (151). The breeze on the cheek is a sign of what is not legible in the discourse that continues to imagine the black body as a collective, public place of pain. Rankine foregrounds the idea of black bodies as "public places" when she depicts the rhythm of "lay[ing] your body in the body." The full passage is:

> When you lay your body in the body
> entered as if skin and bone were public places,
> when you lay your body in the body
> entered as if you're the ground you walk on,
> you know no memory should live in these memories
> becoming the body of you. (144)

The feeling expressed in the words "entered as if skin and bone were public places" is often the feeling of *entered as if skin and bone were the public places of the black past*. Rankine expresses the horror of one's skin and bone becoming a public repository of the black past.

In the play *The White Card*, Rankine dramatizes the practice of "laying your body in the body" (2019: 61–62). The character Charlotte puts her body alongside the sculpture art (placed on the ground) that is an autopsy outline of Michael Brown's body after he was murdered by the white policeman. The scene is in the living room of the white collectors of black art (and black pain). Charlotte, when she lies on the floor and fills in the autopsy outline with her body, is trying to find a way to fight the violence of the white collectors' treatment of the black body as a public place where black pain can be aestheticized and owned and exhibited as art. As Charlotte lies on the floor, the white people who have invited her to this dinner party in their house continue to talk. Charlotte lies in silence as they argue. As this silent protest is performed on the theater stage, time slows down. The rush of the dialogue cannot move with the same frenzy as we look at Charlotte's body next to the artistic rendering of the autopsy of Michael Brown. Charlotte is shocked when Charles (the white art collector and investor in the building of prisons) unveils this art that gestures to Kenneth Goldsmith's 2015 reading of Michael Brown's autopsy report as a poem (Goldsmith's conceptual art performance "The Body of Michael Brown").

Charlotte is a black artist whose practice of reenactment (with photography) aims to make people see what they could not see in the "original" representations of acts of anti-black violence. After witnessing Charles's way of talking about this "artistic autopsy" that he has bought, Charlotte abandons her interest in reenactment and begins a new art project that aims to make whiteness visible. As Charles, in scene 2, looks at an excessive number of photographs of his skin, Rankine creates a sense of the slow composition of the *white self* as a *white body* in the middle of a spatial and temporal world. Rankine reshapes Fanon's "slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world" into a focus on the white "burdens of

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epidermal inscription" (Cheng 2011: 13). In *Second Skin*, Anne Cheng describes the dream of a second skin as, for blackened subjects, the desire to "escape the burdens of epidermal inscription" (13). When Charlotte makes Charles the object of her photographic lens, she refuses to allow Charles to "escape the burden of epidermal inscription." When Charles sees the photographs that Charlotte has taken of him as she followed him without his being aware of her camera's gaze, he feels so much disorientation and frustration that he eventually removes his shirt, puts his hands in the air, and asks her to shoot him. The slow composition of his white self as a white body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world overwhelms him. Rankine, in scene one of this play, makes Rauschenberg's *White Painting* one of the works of art that Charles owns and displays in his living room. Charlotte's photographs of Charles's whiteness beg to be compared to Rauschenberg's *White Painting*. Rankine seems to be asking us to see the racialized and not racialized dimensions of Rauschenberg's painting as we also learn to see the marking and possible unmarking of whiteness and blackness on the bodies of Charles and Charlotte.

The White Card ends with the click and flash of a camera. Rankine ends with the sense of a photograph being taken (a photograph that, unlike Charlotte's photographs, will not be seen by the audience, a photograph that is not yet here). This final sound in this play is the ephemeral click and flash that disrupts the thick time that makes skin a receptacle of race (the time that shapes the earlier parts of scene 2 that make Charlotte's black body and Charles's white body the *matter* of race). After Charlotte rages against white power by making Charles's whiteness visible, Charles finally begins to discover (finally begins to realize) the white privilege imprinted on his skin and then muses about the everyday shedding of skin. The final sound of the click and flash of the camera is the temporal and spatial world of the shedding (the unmarking) of race. The play must end with this click and flash of the unmarking; we cannot fully experience this unmarking but we imagine the unimaginable. We almost feel the unmarking; the unmarking seems so close. It is *finna* happen. Within this click and flash, we stop believing what we see and begin to learn to see (or feel) what Toni Morrison, in *Paradise* (1997), hails as the "open body."

Morrison introduces the idea of the open body as she imagines, in *Paradise*, a type of art therapy that would allow women to mark and decorate templates of their bodies drawn on a cellar floor and learn, through this marking of the outlines of their bodies, how to shed some of the heaviness of the marks on their actual bodies. The open body emerges, in *Paradise*, as a women-centered

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alternative to the racial inscription that overdetermines the "8-rock" ideology of the depth of unadulterated blackness, the ideology that shapes the sensibility of the all-black, patriarchal town named Ruby that is set apart from the Convent where the women discover the "open body" (Morrison 1997: 265). The character Seneca "when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, . . . chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor" (265). Morrison makes the open body seem like the women's process of rediscovering the flesh that has been distorted and sculpted into the closed body.

What language can express what black flesh feels like during the fleeting moments of the "open body," when all of the forces of anti-blackness lose their ability to explain black life and we rehear the famous Sam Cooke lyric "change is gonna come" as a description of a radical black present, not an optimistic view of black futures? The lived experience of *finna* (of "gonna come") is not black optimism. It is the radical, impossible practice of black refusal of white power.

The Time of the Open Body

In Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* (2018), the time of the open body is dramatized when Moses proclaims, "against my body / black and free / these weapons that you wield / have no more strength," as his words arrest the power of Ossifer (the white police officer who is attempting to capture him) (95). The words "against my body" express the pushing out of the forces that attempt to claim his body. The stage directions are "The space changes" (95). This time and space of feeling what is "against" the body is the vestibularity of flesh. This is the time and space of what R. A. Judy (2020: 184), in *Sentient Flesh*, describes as the simultaneity of being outside and inside the enclosures that make black subjects become the "enslaved captive body." Judy rethinks Spillers's hieroglyphics of flesh as Spillers's move from the architecture of the vestibule to the abstraction of "vestibularity." For Judy, this vestibularity is the "disciplining action of culture on the flesh" (184–85). When Judy thinks about the vestibule as the space where the "traces of being outside, such as shoes and outerwear, are left," the vestibularity of flesh becomes the in-between space when and where one is becoming the "enslaved captive body" even as the traces of being outside of that pure and total captivity remain (184).

The traces of being outside of the epidermalization of blackness are felt by blackened subjects in ways that remain opaque and illegible (in ways that are too opaque and illegible to continue to be visualized as some sort of double consciousness). In *Five Poems* (2002), a text with poems written by

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Toni Morrison and silhouettes created by Kara Walker, the state of feeling the traces of being outside even as one is situated inside is figured, in Morrison's poem "The Perfect Ease of Grain," as "Welcome doors held open / When goodbye is 'So long'" (Morrison 2002: n.p.). Morrison captures the suspended time of what Judy describes as the "boundless exterior" and the "enclosed interior." Morrison's images in this poem are an apt way of rethinking the time of the open black body as the suspended state of the taking off of shoes and outerwear (in Judy's image of the vestibule) and also the suspended state of the holding on to underwear, the suspended state of the undergarments of flesh that race has touched but not removed. Racial epidermalization is the outer clothing that covers but does not remove the undergarments of flesh. In this poem "The Perfect Ease of Grain," the time of flesh is depicted as "Time enough to spill." Morrison makes time of the black open body feel like liquid. The liquid blackness flows through what Judy describes as the "boundless exterior" of flesh that is in the same space and time (the space and time of vestibularity) of what he describes as the "enclosed interior" of the "enslaved captive body." What time is it when you are black? It is, as Morrison teaches us in this poem, the time of liquid spaces that make us feel that which Fanon describes as the "congealed black blood" as actually still congealing (Fanon 1967: 92). In *Five Poems*, Morrison imagines five scenes of the open body, the black embodiment of the not yet here.

The first poem, "Eve Remembering," is the scene of the "undoing of the eyes" and the move to black abandon. As Morrison builds on her images of "bodacious black Eves" in *Paradise* (1997), she makes the black Eve in this poem gain a new way of seeing once she tastes "sweet power." The speaker proclaims, "The taste undid my eyes." Blackness becomes a structure of feeling, not a way of being seen, when we stop seeing what the racial epidermalization of blackness continues to naturalize. When our eyes are "undone," we can feel the freedom of the black abandon that Kara Walker captures in her non-illustration of this poem.

What time is it when you're black? For Walker, in this image, the visual non-answer is: Time for the withdrawal and release and refusal that becomes the space-clearing gesture of the outstretched hand and the taut arm of a black woman torquing and letting go of the eating (or wearing) of the banana given to black Eves who never had access to the forbidden apple given to white Eves.

The second poem, "The Perfect Ease of Grain," makes black abandon feel ecstatic as "red cherries become jam." Morrison writes, "Ecstasy becomes us all." This part of the poetic sequence shapes black abandon into the Ellisonian different experience of time. The "time enough to spill" is, for Morrison,

the space of black love where trauma does not define black life. Time that does not spill (time that is contained) cannot explain the excessiveness of black abandon (the lived experiences of being possessed by dispossession). In the third poem, "Someone Leans Near," black abandon is shaped into the "breath" that is "on your skin": "Then on your skin a breath caresses / The salt your eyes have shed." These lines decenter the racial epidermalization of blackness as Morrison makes us imagine the imprint on the skin that the lightness of breath can create. The preposition "on" ("on your skin") signals Morrison's desire to make touched skin an alternative to the racial marking of skin. The fourth poem in this sequence is a move from "touched skin" to the "unadorned," the time of flesh that "comes naked into the world." Morrison, in each poem, moves closer and closer to the impossible unmarking of the black body. The final poem makes it clear that the Middle Passage has made the open body constantly fight to not be an "enslaved captive body": "Look how the fish mistake my hair for home."

When Morrison moves in this poetic sequence, from the "touched skin" to the "unadorned," she signals that there is a layer of ornamentalism embedded in the flesh that is called a black body. The ornamental personhood that Anne Cheng analyzes in *Ornamentalism* is not entirely different from the epidermalization of blackness. Cheng makes *ornamentalism* mean the objecthood that creates personhood (as opposed to the objecthood of blackened subjects who are rendered "parahuman") (Cheng 2019: 3). She poses the question, "What about bodies not undone by objectness but enduring *as* objects?" (22). Morrison's move to the open body is the illegible black ornamentalism (the hieroglyphics of the flesh) that is constantly being misread as the "enslaved captive body" with no access to the objecthood that creates personhood (the ornamental personhood of the yellow woman that Cheng analyzes).

Cheng muses, "Where black femininity is *vestibular*, Asiatic femininity is *ornamental*" (6). The flesh-always-in-the-process-of-becoming-the-black-body is vestibular, but Cheng herself, at the end of *Ornamentalism*, grants that black femininity is both vestibular and ornamental. Cheng draws on Morrison's image of the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back, Spillers's hieroglyphics of the flesh, and Lacan's focus on the tension between petrification and animation as she ends *Ornamentalism* with gestures to the connections between the ornamental personhood of the figure of the yellow woman and the ornamental vestibularity of the figure of the black woman. Cheng does not use this term *ornamental vestibularity*, but she *almost* arrives at this idea as she reveals the connections between the Asiatic femininity that gains life

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through objecthood and the black femininity that is crushed and undone when rendered an object. The amorphous flesh/body vestibularity of blackness gains the human/object tension of ornamentalism when blackness becomes tied to what Cheng calls "sartorial excess" and the "dream of a second skin" (Cheng 2011: 13).

Black Anticipation of Second Skin

The desire to not be burdened by epidermal inscription makes blackened subjects imagine other ways of being covered. Cheng, at the end of *Ornamentalism*, as she brings "black flesh and yellow ornament" together, proposes, "The flesh that passes through objecthood needs 'ornament' as a way back to itself" (154). She revisits Baby Suggs's sermon on flesh, in *Beloved*, as a means of crystallizing how ornamentalism is a medium that allows black flesh to continue to move through objecthood as black subjects live. I am interested in the conceptual turn that Cheng makes when she implies, at the end of *Ornamentalism* in this theory of passing through objecthood, that her earlier idea of black flesh being undone by objecthood is not entirely true, or if it is true, we must rethink what it means to be "undone." To be undone by objecthood might mean that one is living the undoing of the imagined boundaries between person and thing, and embodying the anticipated, not-yet-here space where blackness is vibrant matter. Cheng cites Paul D's words in *Beloved*: "you are your own best thing." To be undone by objecthood might mean that you are living the already here of the anticipated state of being "your own best thing." Cheng uses Lacan's petrification/animation tension to think about the difference between total crushing objecthood and the state of enduring as an object and developing a personhood that is animated through one's being touched by objects. The animation of "petrified pain" emerges as a way of rethinking the meaning of Spillers's words "hieroglyphics of flesh." Cheng allows us to rethink the hieroglyphics as both a state of opacity (this flesh we might call a black body) and a state of "articulate flesh" (Faulkner's words in *Absalom, Absalom!*). Blackened subjects live with the hieroglyphics of flesh touching and animating their enslaved captive bodies. Ornamental personhood surrounds and animates the petrified objecthood of blackened subjects.

Kara Walker's silhouette images that accompany Morrison's poems in *Five Poems* gesture to the undoing of petrified pain through animation. The silhouettes give shape to black flesh becoming and not becoming the enslaved captive body. Walker created these non-illustrations of Morrison's poems after

she received the poems; Morrison wrote the poems before Walker created the silhouettes. The time of these silhouettes is literally the "time enough to spill" that Morrison hails in the second poem in *Five Poems*. Walker's silhouettes "spill" out of the non-container of Morrison's words. Since Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's (2004) first book-length study of Kara Walker's art, the iconic black-and-white silhouetted figures created by Walker have been analyzed through many lenses, such as "seeing the unspeakable," as satire, and as a simultaneous representation and erasure of scenes of subjection. In *Five Poems*, as Walker's silhouettes speak alongside Morrison's words, they gain a scale that is strikingly different from the life-size images on gallery walls. In *Five Poems*, Walker's silhouettes are not arranged as scenes (as they are when viewed on gallery walls). As Walker responds to Morrison's words and moves to the smaller scale, the silhouettes lose the aura of a life-size narrative and gain the aura of abstract shapes in the process of gaining a recognizable, legible form. Without the life-size narrative (even when it is a blurred narrative) of slavery and the afterlife of slavery that shapes the iconic Walker silhouettes that have appeared on gallery walls, the Walker images in *Five Poems* pivot on the suspension of the body (not the suspension of time that we feel in the cinematic gallery wall images). This suspension of the body, in these images, produces a tension between forces that petrify the black subject and forces that allow her to keep moving. The most powerful connection between Morrison's words in the poems and Walker's images may be the feeling of the "unadorned," the time of flesh that "comes naked into the world." As Walker responds to these words written by Morrison, she captures the form of formlessness that Morrison conveys. In Walker's images, Morrison's sense of the "unadorned" nakedness is transfigured into the adornment of nakedness as the silhouettes make clothing look like skin. The inseparability of nakedness and adornment saturates Walker's images. The edges of the cut-out silhouettes evoke the precarious edge between seeing arrested objects (enslaved captive bodies), signaled in Walker's images as naked primitivized black bodies, and seeing the motion of ornamental personhood, signaled in Walker's images as post-black body, fleshy shapes of black futurity.

Morrison, in *Tar Baby*, helps us feel the temporal dimension of this black ornamental personhood. She makes potentiality the tempo of this impulse to decorate as a way to escape the racial epidermalization. When Son in *Tar Baby* "just" needs Alma Estée to stand still in order to restore order to his sense of natural black beauty, it becomes clear that black ornamentalism is the kinetic energy, the movement of *finna*, that disrupts the stasis of racial epidermalization. Morrison writes,

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Figure 1. Toni Morrison, *Five Poems*, illustrated by Kara Walker (Las Vegas: Rainmaker Editions, 2002), n.p.

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> So he [Son] had changed, given up fraternity, or believed he had, until he saw Alma Estée in a wig the color of dried blood. Her sweet face, her midnight skin mocked and destroyed by the pile of synthetic dried blood on her head. It was all mixed up. But he could have sorted it out if she had just stood there like a bougainvillea in a girdle, like a baby jaguar with lipstick on, like an avocado with earrings, and let him remove it. (Morrison 1981: 299)

This passage is a signature image of the difference between Fanon's idea of "crushing objecthood" and Cheng's idea of ornamental personhood (the idea that people can endure as objects and not be undone as objects). Son cannot understand that Alma Estée is living in a state of potentiality as she makes her body an assemblage that is "all mixed up."

Toni Morrison, in *God Help the Child*, her final novel and only novel set in the twenty-first century, directly focuses on the theme of black ornamental personhood. The novel stages the difference between the temporal and spatial dimensions of *enduring* through objecthood in a manner that contrasts greatly with the images of being shattered through objecthood in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Images of the interaction of people and objects abound in *God Help the Child*: Bride's smile interacting with the lipstick imprint of a smile on a wine glass, the image of Bride and Booker's spines interacting with the car seats' "soft hide of cattle," and repeated images of Booker's shaving brush rubbing against and being rubbed against Bride's skin (Morrison 2015). Morrison makes the friction between people and surfaces matter as the tension between surface and depth becomes the prime theme of the novel. Bride's mother cannot bear to touch Bride when she is a child because she recoils from what seems to have always already marked her as bound to have a hard, thick life of black trauma. Bride's ongoing fascination with the aliveness of objects that retain the touch of Booker occurs alongside images of Bride's body literally becoming less marked by thickness as she loses weight and gains a strange surface smoothness as her ear piercings close and her pubic hair disappears with a total erasure different from any waxing or shaving. Bride wears white clothing every day in order to accentuate her dark skin and shape it into a glowing ornament. As Bride becomes a well-paid executive in the beauty industry, her ornamental personhood (the everyday wearing of white clothes that make her dark skin glow) makes her feel that she is no longer crushed by the colorism, performed by her mother, that made her childhood years so painful. In *God Help the Child*, the white clothes (the seeming counterpart to Alma Estée's red wig in *Tar Baby*) are Bride's dream of a second skin.

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Cheng, in *Second Skin*, quickly but powerfully moves from white modernist fantasies of this second skin to black dreams of escaping the naturalized idea that the black body is eternally marked by the anti-black gaze. Morrison, in her images of Bride, shapes the black dream of a second skin into the actual lived experience of ornamentalized, exoticized dark skin as a covering and (as Bride's *black-in-white-clothing* daily performance makes her wealthy) a literal overcompensation for racial epidermalization. The all-white clothing is a prime example of the sartorial excess of the ornamental personhood that Cheng analyzes in *Ornamentalism*. Cheng begins and ends this study of the figure of the "yellow woman" with a focus on black flesh and a return to her analysis, in *Second Skin*, of the turning of Josephine Baker's skin into a complex surface and site where the binaries of essence and covering collapse. Cheng's use of the term "yellow woman" opens up other dimensions of her final move to the black layers of ornamental personhood. The once popular and now outdated phrase "high yellow," in the colorism discourse of African American communities, was used as black people internalized anti-black racism and imagined light-skinned black people (usually light-skinned black women) as hovering above "unredeemed" darker-skinned blackness. Within the colorism script of anti-blackness, the access to ornamental personhood that "high yellow" black women have as they live and "endure" as objects on the pedestal of being closer to whiteness differs greatly from the "crushing objecthood" that darker-skinned black women battle.

There is a temporal dimension to the difference between the ornamental personhood of the figure of the "high yellow" woman and the figure of the "enslaved captive" darker-skinned black body. There is, of course, a long history of images of the "high yellow" bodies as the "new people" emerging after the "older" darker-skinned black body. This image making is most striking when William Faulkner, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, describes the octoroon "butterfly . . . carrying nothing of what was into what is, leaving nothing of what is behind but eliding complete and intact," as opposed to his images of the "coal black and ape-like woman . . . dragged . . . out of whatever two dimensional backwater" (Faulkner 1936: 196, 205). This projection of a different time and space onto lighter-skinned and darker-skinned blackness has not entirely dissipated. What time is it when you are black in the twenty-first century? Beyoncé's darkening of her skin in a 2011 French fashion magazine tribute to Fela Kuti offers one way of understanding the way that colorism continues to limit the potentiality of black ornamental personhood (black ornamentalism's ability to continue to push back against the steady forces of racial epidermalization).

Figure 2. Beyoncé, 2011, *L'Officiel Paris* magazine.

In this 2011 photo shoot for *L'Officiel Paris*, Beyoncé's darkened face either looks like blackface or like the dream of a second skin that should not be automatically read as blackface. Not seeing Beyoncé as always already an embodiment of "high yellow" privilege is the only way one can see her darkened face, in these images, as a play with ornamental excess that does not need to be reduced to blackface. These images reveal the connections between Rankine's time of the sigh and Morrison's time of the open black body and anticipation of second skin. The sigh of exhaustion might be the most appropriate response to the very impulse of the Paris fashion magazine photographers to make darker skin on the light-skinned African American celebrity signal her connection to Fela Kuti and Nigerian culture at large. The sigh, for Rankine in *Citizen*, is also figured as the non-expression of what has become inaudible as the black subject refuses to react to an ongoing everyday performance of structural anti-blackness. The images of Beyoncé in the "second skin" of darker-skinned blackness may produce this other type of sigh, the inaudible one that signals, as Rankine shows in *Citizen*, that it is time for more black flesh work that reminds us that racial epidermalization itself continues to be as violent as blackface.

The responses to Beyoncé's wearing of this second skin included a significant amount of outrage over the photographers' inability to understand how offensive the images were to Nigerians (and all black Africans) who tire of the assumption that dark-skinned blackness signals "African." Dodai Stewart, a deputy editor of *Jezebel*, an online media platform, critiqued the photographers' treatment of Beyoncé as a "white model, i.e. a blank-palette object on which to place concepts" (HuffPost 2011). This language crystal-

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lizes what is at stake when Morrison creates the new grammar of the open black body. Given that the very idea of anyone being a "blank-palette object" is a sham, Morrison calls for a recognition of black people's right to make this fantasy of the open body an experience of black possibility and black futurity. The blankness of the "white model" continues to be reproduced, and the racial inscriptions on the black body continue to be naturalized. If we allow the waywardness of the *L'Officiel Paris* images to remain wayward, we might feel a sense of anticipation in these images as we wonder when blackened subjects might feel free enough to let go of any need to police what we do with our flesh and let the solidarity of *black flesh in motion* matter more than the *historicity* of the black body (Fanon 1967: 112).

The Flesh of *Finna*

Black flesh in motion is a marked body that feels marked and unmarked. The most resonant part of Spillers's theory of flesh is the idea that we need to find language that begins to capture what it means to "negotiate between the tenses" of "Let's face it. I am a marked woman" and the speculative wonder of the proposition of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" (McDowell 1989: 144). The speculative tense of a hieroglyphics that has not yet become a recognizable language is embedded in Spillers's turn to the opacity of the hieroglyphic after beginning "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" with the resonant declaration "Let's face it. I am a marked woman . . ." (Spillers [1987] 2003: 203). Deborah McDowell's lucid phrase "negotiating between tenses" opens up space to think about the lived experience of black temporality as such a profound undoing of the boundaries between past, present, and future that even naming the tenses "past, present, future" stops making sense. "Negotiating between tenses" captures the practice of new grammar embedded in any attempt to create space for black flesh and the open body within discourses that keep hailing the historicity of the black body and erasing the Ellisonian "outside history" offbeat of black flesh. The lived tension of tenses created by the afterlife of slavery is embedded in what Achille Mbembe describes as the "time of entanglement" (2001: 1). Mbembe, in *On the Postcolony*, inveighs against the constant rendering of Africa as a static place and proposes the "time of entanglement" as a way of feeling "time on the move" (66, 71, 73). The key move in all of these critics' rethinking of "what time is it when you are black" is the *simultaneous* emphasis on the marked black body and on what is moving as if it is not always already marked. As black people live their lives of *finna-tude*, they live the simultaneity of the afterlife

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of slavery and an always emerging *afterlife of the afterlife* of slavery (when one is no longer the captive).

This time of *finna*-tude is a state of disorientation. The "hey you" of interpellation does not always produce the turn of recognition. As Terry Eagleton (1994: 217) argues, "What if we fail to recognize and respond to the call of the Subject? What if we return the reply: 'Sorry, you've got the wrong person'? . . . There are, after all, many different ways in which we can be 'hailed,' and some cheery cries, whoops, and whistles may strike us as more appealing than some others." The cacophony of sounds that Eagleton imagines (the sonic refusal to respond properly) creates what Fred Moten calls "cut interpellation" (2003: 69). In *In the Break*, cut interpellation is presented as "incomplete christening" (69). This sense that we are not entirely what we are becoming (that we are turning in response to the ongoing hailing and caught in the torque that makes the turning itself the shape of our being) rethinks Louis Althusser's image of the turn of the individual as she becomes a subject. Althusser (1970: 131) writes, "The hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*." The turning force, the twisting force, of blackness might be the incomplete christening that makes the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn more of a state of suspension than an act of subjection. The cut interpellation is the cut act of subjection that makes black flesh a kind of torque, a kind of ontology that can only be felt in the torque.

This state of suspension is a space where the tenses of the black present are negotiated. Toni Morrison muses, "It is terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language" (Taylor-Guthrie 1994: 123–24). Morrison may be thinking about the uninflected "be" in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Phrases such as "she do be late" are the black vernacular hailing of a present tense that can sound like it contains multitudes. The multitudinous present tense that destroys any need for a distinct past or future tense is the type of new grammar that can hold on to an awareness of everything that keeps making black people into captives and, also, hail everything that could somehow, some way, set the captives free. The flesh of *finna* is what Fanon discovers in the last pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* as he famously declares, "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man" (1967: 231). Homi Bhabha and others have read this *new grammar* as Fanon's move to the obsolescence of alterity, but this new grammar of the incomplete sentence is also the seizure of black is-ness even if that is-ness is an escape from legibility (a refusal of the "fact of blackness," Charles Mark-

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mann's provocative mistranslation of "L'expérience vécue du Noir," the title of chapter five in the French original of *Black Skin, White Masks*). The most direct translation of the French original would be "the lived experience of the Negro." Fanon's analysis of his case studies as a psychiatrist could never contain his anticipation of the lived experience of black flesh.

We feel most acutely Fanon's turn from the historicity of the black body to the anticipation of the offbeat of black flesh when we remember his image of the "tight smile" (in chapter five) and let this image speak alongside his explicit refusal of the "body of history" in the final chapter.

> "Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.
>
> The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions. (111, 231)

The black "tight smile" is formed as the speaker moves. The words "Look, a Negro" try to name and arrest the black flesh in motion. This passage complicates Fanon's assertion, in this same chapter, that the "black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (110). If we think the "eyes of the white man" is the only way of seeing, we understand this claim. But, in the image of the objectifying words that "flick over" but cannot "stick," Fanon makes us feel a black movement that the "eyes of the white man" cannot contain. The emphasis on the white gaze that cannot mark the black flesh in motion is strikingly different from Fanon's image of the "hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood" (112). As opposed to the heaviness of the white gaze in some of Fanon's images of the "spatial and temporal world" of the black body, the image of the "tight smile" *pivots* on the lightness of what "flicks" over black flesh (111). The tension of being captive and being free holds that "tight smile" in place. What will happen when the tightness is released? What time is it when black release happens? What we *finna* do?

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